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The Supreme Conqueror

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by

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The Supreme Conqueror

I

W

ithout beginning and without end, over unimaginable aeons of time, the rolling cycles of the cosmos unfold themselves.

Worlds arise, produce their living beings, their civilisations and then fall into decay and pass away. Entire universes, planetary systems, whirling in the vastness of space, emerge from their gaseous wombs, live out their span of life and disappear.

Nowhere is there stability, nowhere peace, nowhere security. All is change, incessant, repeated—a blind whirling in the vortex of becoming. Birth, decay and death, the one following inevitably upon the other. Birth, decay, and death. Over and over again—the blind groping, the craving for being, a being that can never achieve being, because it is always becoming.

Man, caught in this blind cosmic machinery, himself

a part of it, is carried onward, through life after life—a process, not a being, because he too cannot free himself from the universal flux, cannot achieve the perfect state of being, the perfect equilibrium. Driven by an insatiable thirst, he clings to his minute illusion of self as a man clutches at a floating spar in a whirlpool, he is the slave of *saṃsāra*; its slave and at the same time its creator. The vortex is also the ultimate paradox.

Blind because ignorant, man struggles pitifully, matching his puny strength against the huge impersonal forces of this cosmic process. Age after age, aeon after aeon, over measures of time beyond thought, swept along by currents of passion in a void that he peoples with the phantoms of desire, he drifts from birth to birth, from world to world.

But in this dark, chaotic night of suffering and ignorance, from time to time a light shines forth. Then men see the Truth and many of them break the chains that bind them and gain their release. From time to time, in the course of aeons, a being by his own efforts penetrates the thick veil of ignorance and teaches man the way to ultimate peace, cessation from becoming, equilibrium, fulfilment.

One destined to Buddhahood is born.

II

In this world-cycle, it took place close to the foothills of the Himalayas, for ages the home of India's great saints and teachers. A prince of the Sakyas, a race of the warrior-nobility of ancient Bharata, was born at Kapilavatthu on the borders of modern Nepal. He was named Siddhattha Gotama; his father was a Raja, Suddhodana, his mother Māyā. His race was that of the Ikshvaku, the Solar Dynasty, proud, heroic, rulers by descent and by instinct, who looked even upon brahmins with disdain.

But the prince was greater even than his lineage. For at the age of twenty-nine he abandoned his rank, turned aside from the destiny of a world-ruler that had been predicted for him, and became a wandering ascetic. The Sakyas were ambitious, but his ambition was greater than theirs; it was the greatest of which men or gods are capable. Prince Siddhattha cared nothing for earthly glory, for power or for luxury. The tears of the world were too real to him; its pain and insecurity were too vivid; he could not rest, nor could he find distraction in activity. One thing, and one thing alone, could satisfy him—absolute knowledge, absolute liberation and absolute bliss. For, having

attained these, he could help the world of suffering beings.

So he renounced the world and set forth to find liberation. At first he did as all seekers do; he placed himself under a teacher, the best teacher of the time. Twice he did this, but having mastered all they could import, he left them dissatisfied. He had practised their methods, attained to the realm of Brahmas and identified himself with the highest cosmic forces, but this was not enough. He must get beyond the process of cosmic becoming, must find the last, eternal, unchanging state.

He left his teachers and embarked on the path of extreme asceticism. He lived in the forest, mortified his flesh, fasted and watched and guarded his senses, deprived his body and reduced his frame to a skeleton. For six years he continued this course with the indomitable resolution of a warrior who knows no surrender. His fair body became black, his rounded limbs mere sticks hung with withered skin through which the bones stuck sharply, his belly became hollow and close to his spinal column. His five companion ascetics watched and waited. Never had they seen anything like this, accustomed though they were to the superhuman mortifications of their kind. Surely his supreme struggles must gain the supreme reward. Surely he would be their teacher and

liberator. They watched and waited.

But the prince-ascetic became weaker and weaker and still he had not achieved the final goal. He had gone beyond all of them, including many who were not his peers in spiritual attainment who had set themselves up as teachers and were honoured and claimed large followings. He could have done the same, but not for one moment did he waver in his set purpose. He had not achieved his goal and he knew it. He must go on, higher, higher.

One day he collapsed. Scarcely conscious he lay, unable to move. Yet still that fine, indomitable mind was alive, active, searching. What had he gained? Instead of becoming superhuman he was reduced to this—a pitiful victim of the insatiable body, weak, powerless, almost dead from hunger. And then suddenly he knew: this was not the way. They had all been wrong. To abuse the body is to enslave oneself to the body, whatsoever form the abuse might take. The body would take its revenge. Its conquest must take a different form from this.

He was offered food and he accepted it. Giving the body its just demands, he strengthened himself again; and once more his mind asserted itself over the body, clear and luminous and resolute. But his five companions were grieved—grieved and disappointed.

He had failed them; he who was to have been their teacher, the master-ascetic, the greatest *rishi* of all time, had failed them. He had deserted his quest, had taken to easy living again, and was no more worthy to be their leader. They left him.

Alone, the prince-ascetic found himself at Gaya and once again he addressed himself to the supreme task. Seated cross-legged beneath a tree, he considered his position. He had tried so many paths, and all ended the same way. Was there no end to this quest? He summoned all the latent powers of mind and body and made the supreme resolution: "Even though my body should fall into decay and dissolution, I shall not rise from this seat until I have attained Buddhahood "

In the first watch of the night, Prince Siddhattha meditated.

III

It was the festival of spring ploughing. Already the sun was hot, but where the child sat there was shade from the sal tree that spread its branches over his head. His father, the king, was at the plough,

performing the ancient, universal ritual of breaking the soil to ensure a healthy crop for the coming year. Back and forth he went, the handles of the jewelled plough glittering in the golden sunlight, and the child watched. As the rich brown earth was overturned, worms and insects were exposed and flocks of birds followed the track of the plough. Noisily they clamoured, fluttering their wings and jostling one another for the fattest worms, the largest insects. They fought and screamed at one another in their tiny bird voices, pecking at the ground, eating the living creatures as they were turned up by the royal plough.

A microcosm of the universal order. Worms, insects, born into the world to be eaten by birds. The birds, in their turn, killed and eaten by larger creatures, and the animals themselves food for one another. A universal, ceaseless round of inane carnage: the whole earth, a battle-ground and a cemetery. Pain and suffering and bloodshed, birth, decay and death. And in between birth and death, continual uncertainty, restlessness, disappointment, disease, separation from that which is pleasant, contact with that which is unpleasant. In a word, suffering.

And the cause of this suffering? The answer was there, too. It was craving, thirst for life. The craving of the worms and the insects for life, the craving of the birds for life, the craving of animals, the craving of

men. They were born and reborn because they craved for the satisfaction of the senses. Their craving bound them inexorably to the wheel of becoming and so they suffered, hopelessly, endlessly, for there could be no life, no process of becoming, without this accompanying element of suffering.

A strange thought: what precisely did it mean? It must mean that suffering goes deeper than the mere superficial aspect of it that we all see. For that suffering appears to be balanced by a contrasting enjoyment. A fleeting enjoyment, it is true, but still happiness of a kind. But fleeting—fleeting. There was the answer. There could be no true happiness in fleeting sensations. Impermanence—suffering—a pattern, a relationship was beginning to emerge.

What of the material phenomena of nature? Did that know anything of this suffering? Was there a cosmic suffering, something inherent in all compounded things, an element that existed whether there was any awareness of it or not? What did the body have to say? Turn inward, concentrate the attention, get to the very foundations of physical being. Search there.

Yes. There it was. There was the agitation of the molecules, the atomic restlessness of the body, felt, perceived, the arising and passing away. So inconceivably rapid as to be imperceptible to the

distracted mind, but very clear to the trained, stabilised attention that brought all its functions to bear on the object, the cosmic suffering, inalienable, an inherent part of all phenomena throughout the universe. The primordial fact.

So as long as there was the arising of compounded things that are impermanent, there must be suffering. The perceived suffering that is in grief, lamentation, pain, despair, and the unperceived suffering that is the agitation and restlessness of the atomic constituents of matter and mental formations, each one an aspect of the other. And it was all the result of craving, the thirst for sentient life.

In this process of arising and passing away was a momentary birth and death. Mind and body alike were changing from moment to moment. Where then was the stable, immutable element, the self, the ātman, the soul? On the one hand, there was his body, and, according to all the schools except the materialist ones, there was the immaterial element, the spirit, opposed to it and yet in some inexplicable way bound by this gross physical envelope. Of what did this spirit, the conscious element, consist? There was sensation; that was indisputable. There was also perception, awareness of the sensation. There were also the mental formations and tendencies that make up the character—were they permanent? No, they too were subject to

change and transformation, because they were linked up with past and present actions, kamma. So what was left? Only consciousness—the sum of awareness, the knowledge that says: “I am”—and that in the very act of asserting, it is changing, flowing, perpetually in transition. So there could be no permanent entity of selfhood, no single element alone and independent of the others to constitute a self. Just five aggregates, like bundles bound together; when they were all present, there was what is called a living being. An interdependent complex of factors, with no element stable or constant and no link of self-identity from one thought-moment to another.

Void. Yet in the void, this infinite potentiality of suffering. A current passing from one phase of becoming to another—from childhood to maturity, maturity to old age, old age to death. And then a leap, a spark of the energy—potential jumping to a new manifestation, a “rebirth.” Not the same, yet not another, as the man is not the same as the infant, the old man not the same as the man in his prime. All different, yet all belonging to the same sequence, the same current of actions and results. Inheritors of the kamma of the past: ancestors of a yet unborn futurity.

The cosmic pattern takes shape—visibly the factors arrange themselves. The vast incomprehensible machinery is seen, not from within, but from the

outside. A new dimension of knowledge and experience is opening up.

The universe of phenomena, of compounded things, arranges itself in accordance with a common denominator—three characteristics which are in their final essence one, because each is the natural corollary of the others. Impermanence; and because of impermanence, suffering; and because of impermanence and suffering, the absence of self.

The lean ascetic seated under the banyan tree at Gaya—was he the same as that child who had been seated under the sal tree watching his father the king on that day of the spring ploughing so many years ago? In a sense, yes; but in a deeper sense he was not. The ascetic was the result of the child; the child was but one link in a series of beings flowing back into an infinite past.

Let the mind run back. Beyond this life, to birth before birth. Where was the beginning? Nowhere could it be found. Man, deva, animal, man again, infinitely, endlessly but no beginning to the process, no point at which it could be said, “here is the first link in the chain, the first cause.” Over hundreds of aeons the luminous, developed mind might retrace the paths of lost time, but the beginning would ever elude it. For there could be no beginning to time when this

was not, no time outside the realm of conditioned things.

And there arose in his mind the knowledge of past births.

IV

With a supernormal vision in which space and time were transcended, he surveyed the world and the immensities of world upon world beyond. The relativity of all things became clear to him and he traced their relationships, above, below and across. Men, gods, in worlds of form and worlds without form, he saw distinctly, in the light of a new knowledge. Only the dark frontier of ignorance hemmed them in; they came and went, chained forever to that palpable darkness which seemed to be their very substance, the fabric of their being and the atmosphere they breathed. There arose in his mind the knowledge of their present birth, their arising and passing away. Yet still the first cause hid itself, search where he would. And the second watch of the night came to an end.

Ignorance, the sleep of not-knowing, the dreams of the sleeper, acting in a trance of ignorance. And then he saw that here was its beginning; a beginning not in time but co-temporal and all-permeating. For these beings clung to life because they thought it good, believed it to be wholesome and desirable. Every thought, every word, every deed was the outcome of this ignorance. The ever-renewing consciousness, the assertive "I am," sprang from these actions, from the identification of the actions with the actor. Because there was the thought, word and deed, there was the delusion of a thinker, a speaker, a doer, but everywhere it was the same thing—a process that masqueraded as a being. From birth to birth the causal process, the relationship of dependent phenomena. Nothing more.

Out of that came the aggregates of personality, physical and mental, the fivefold group. Body, sensation, perception, tendencies and consciousness; the body equipped with six senses all on fire with craving nourished by contacts and sensations as a fire is nourished by fuel. For out of the contacts came sensation, and from sensation new craving-impulses were born from moment to moment, gathering into a force of grasping that would not let go. And that force became the current of becoming, the becoming which was the enemy of being. A life-force recharged from

moment to moment and endless momentary succession of births and deaths. And when the bundles were at last torn apart and scattered, it was only a simultaneous group death, as against the separate deaths and rebirths of mind and body which, like a flowing river, preserved the seeming identity of that restless current. For on the instant of disintegration, a new mind-body complex arose, the current remanifested itself again somewhere in space and time. All causes must produce a result.

But how could this be expressed? Just as a ripple on the surface of water travels from its point of origin to some other points but the particles of the water are not displaced, so it was only the impulse, the pushing of an active force against the inert mass, imparting movement. It wasn't the water that moved, but the impulse that moved through the water, rebirth—but nothing that was reborn, nothing identical except the force and the direction.

For a long time he contemplated it, in the light of this new knowledge. How completely mistaken they had all been, blinded by the illusion of self. There was no atman, no permanent, unchanging entity. There was only this current of activity functioning in the void; yet from that arose all the suffering of the world, the grief, lamentation, pain and despair of sentient beings. Still and detached he sat and contemplated it,

absorbing the knowledge, seeing the reality for the first time. Plainly the pattern spread itself before his sublimated vision; not in words, not an intellectual concept but a direct realisation.

Then where was the cessation, the peace, the unshakable stillness in which becoming ended and true being took place? Twelve causal factors, and at their head, the primal ignorance. If ignorance were destroyed, then there could be no more actions prompted by ignorance—no more aggregate of kamma. The force would be neutralised. With the kamma force neutralised, there could be no more arising of consciousness, no more mind and body, no more field of sense-perceptions and therefore no more could thirst or grasping arise. That indeed would be the end of the life-process, the end of rebirth, the final end of grief, lamentation, pain and despair. It would be Nibbāna, the great cessation. There at that point, becoming would give place to being—a state that was not life nor death, existence nor non-existence, but was beyond all the opposites and dualities of relativity, the false concepts of ignorance, outside of space and time and eternal, unchanging.

So there was suffering, the cause of suffering and its cessation—three Noble Truths hitherto unrealised, now clear to his awakened insight. One thing more was needed—the way to achieve that cessation, the

method by which beings might, by their own exertions—for there was no supreme deity to help them—eradicate ignorance and gain Nibbāna.

Right view must come first. For unless it is known that all things are impermanent, subject to suffering, and void of self, there can be no starting on the right direction. Without that there could only be the misdirected energy of an atman. Kālāma, who taught that the atman was permanent and unchanging, and so could never get beyond the sphere of sublimation and self-identification. Or the unending struggle with kamma of Uddaka Rāmaputta, who could never free himself from the entanglements of metempsychosis. With right view established, right resolution must follow—the thought free from lust, free from ill will, free from cruelty. The pure, untainted thought of benevolence directed without distinction toward all beings, the resolution to gain Nibbāna. And from that, right speech, truthful, sincere, uttering whatsoever was good for gods and men, beneficial, free from trivialities, from malice and from harshness. Then right action, gentle, non-violent, pliant towards others, but rigid towards the self, restrained and controlled. Also right livelihood—the livelihood gained by work beneficial to living beings, by one who has put away violence in all its forms, who will not encourage violence in others. Then would the character be

formed for right effort—the fourfold great effort, to avoid the arising of impurities and demeritorious states, and to bring to an end those that have already arisen—to avoid and to overcome. Furthermore, to develop states of purity and merit that have not yet arisen, and to encourage and establish those that have already arisen—to develop and to maintain.

This, then, was the teaching of all the Buddhas: to put away evil and to fulfil all good—to purify the heart. Then the way would be made clear for the supramundane path: clear and luminous in the light of virtue which is power. Cultivation of a mind that can see through illusion; right attentiveness, the awareness of the functions, the detached, impersonal regard of body, feeling mind and phenomena, knowing them to be but a part of the cosmic order, not “I,” not “mine,” not “myself.” Then, with the breaking down of the limitations of personality, would come the great psychic powers and the release from pleasure and pain, fear and mundane hope, and the calm, unshakable equilibrium of mind would be realised. And lastly, right concentration, the opening up of new dimensions of experience, the *jhānas*. Detached from sensual objects, from all impure contacts, the mind enters upon the first sublime state, with thought and discursive rumination, distinguished by rapture, happiness and concentration. From thence,

overcoming thought and rumination, it enters the second sublime state, free from the activities of discursive thought, the state filled only with rapture and happiness.

And further, overcoming rapture, the mind enters into the third sublime state, the sphere of equanimity, attentiveness, clear consciousness, and dwells there in the enjoyment of pure happiness. But then, giving up pleasure and pain, joy and grief alike, it enters the fourth sublime state, which is beyond these—the state for which it can neither be said that it is consciousness nor unconsciousness, nor does it admit any of the categories of normal experience. And from there the gate of the deathless is open.

This is the Middle Path that the All Enlightened One discovered, that enables one both to see and to know, that leads to peace, to discernment, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna.

Then the glad cry of the conqueror rang forth from the prince-ascetic who had become the Buddha of this world-cycle: “Long have I sought you, O builder of the house of this body. Now I have found you. Your beam is cast down, your ridge-pole broken. Never again will you build the house. For good, birth and death are ended; I have done what had to be done. The path of virtue is fulfilled. I behold Nibbāna face to face.”

V

The long night was ended and a new light flooded the world. The All-Enlightened One began his ministry of teaching, which he was to continue for forty-five years. Great were his supernormal powers, gained that night under the bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya when he attained omniscience; but first and greatest of all, he placed the power of teaching the Dhamma. He rarely performed miracles, but when he did they were of such kind as to stagger the mind and confound his opponents. Most of all, he desired to convince people by the power of truth alone, so that of their own free will they would accept what he had to tell them and act upon it. His Dhamma is "*ehi passiko*"—that which bids us, "Come and see for yourself." He taught it in the sequence in which it had been discovered by him, beginning with the three signs of being: impermanence, suffering, and non-self. From this came the four Noble Truths: the truths concerning suffering, the arising of suffering, the cessation of suffering and the way leading to that cessation.

The cause of suffering is craving and the process of its arising is shown in the twelve factors of *paṭicca-samuppāda* (dependent origination). Its cessation is

Nibbāna, the unborn, unoriginated, the state free from any possibility of the re-arising of conditioned existence, the ultimate peace. The Supreme Buddha did not attempt to define Nibbāna in words because words relate to concepts, being relates to non-being as day relates to night, and Nibbāna is neither being nor non-being as we understand these words. It is altogether outside all categories or experience; it must be known to be understood.

In his teaching, there is no metaphysic (except where later men and lesser minds have manufactured one); it is a practical way, a path to be trodden. Speculation is useless, a hindrance on the path, and as such the Buddha condemned it. All he asked was that his disciples should examine the factors of phenomenal existence, satisfy themselves that what he taught of it was true, and from there go on to discover by direct insight the real truth that lies beyond phenomena. The way itself, the Middle Way between all extremes, is the Noble Eightfold Path (*ariya-aṭṭhaṅgika-magga*) From this nucleus of teaching, all further developments of ethic-psychology followed in natural and logical sequence, from the Five Precepts of the layman to the intricacies of Abhidhamma, the detailed analysis of mental phenomena.

Very soon after the attainment of enlightenment, the Buddha founded the Order of Monks, containing the

four groups of Ariyan disciples: the Stream Winners, or those who had entered the path; the Once-Returners, those of the second stage of purification who, if they passed away before gaining arahatship, would only be reborn once; the Non-Returners, those destined to achieve rebirth in a Brahma-Realm from whence they would pass into Nibbāna, and the Arahats, the fully perfected and purified for whom there would be no rebirth after this present life. "In whatsoever discipline, O Monks, there are the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold path, there will be found those of the four degrees of saintliness. But in whatsoever discipline the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eight fold path are not found, they cannot be disciples of the four degrees of saintliness." And the Exalted Buddha sent forth his perfected disciples to preach the doctrine. "I, O Monks, have seen suffering and the destruction of suffering and the way leading thereto. I have freed myself of the impurities. You too, O Monks, are freed from the impurities. Go forth, then. Proclaim the Doctrine perfect in its beginning, in its continuation and in its end, for the good, the benefit and the welfare of gods and men."

So it came about that the Doctrine was established and propagated in the world. The noble Order of Monks increased and spread throughout India and beyond, and the gospel of mercy and liberation

became known to all those “whose eyes were but lightly covered with dust.” The Ariyan discipline followed by the monks in their yellow robes was austere but not extreme; it looked more to the mind than to the body, for in the mind is the seat of craving. *“Mano pubbaṅgamā dhammā manoseṭṭhā manomayā,* mind is the forerunner of all phenomena; mind is chief, they are all mind-created.” “Guard therefore the mind, purify the mind, for out of the intention all things come to be.” Neither do you look to any external aid, for “Self is the master of self. What other master could there be?” Put aside all vain beliefs, all faith in rituals and religious performances, for these things avail not against ignorance, being themselves products of ignorance. “In this fathom-long body, O Monks, equipped with sense and sense-perceptions, I declare to you is the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering and the way leading to that cessation.” Never before in a world bewitched by superstition and priestcraft had such a challenging message resounded. The followers of the Supreme Buddha no more resorted to the sacrificial fires, to holocausts of men and beasts to appease the personified force of nature, no more cultivated magic or submitted their bodies to unavailing self-torture. Instead, they cultivated a mind of boundless loving kindness, lived righteously and fearlessly and found a happiness

hitherto unknown to them.

VI

“I promise to observe the precept to abstain from taking life. I promise to observe the precept to abstain from taking that which is not mine. I promise to observe the precept to abstain from adultery. I promise to observe the precept to abstain from untruthful speech. I promise to observe the precept to abstain from intoxicants and drugs.”

To the laymen and women who came to him the Buddha gave these five simple precepts. He did not command, did not take upon himself the authority of a creator-god to punish and reward. He was greater than this. He was the Supreme Teacher, above all beings spiritual and terrestrial, himself having seen, with direct insight, the working of cause and effect. He prescribed the course of conduct that would eliminate evil results and lead upwards. “Take these precepts,” he said in effect, “for by observing them you will avoid the lower courses of rebirth, will diminish suffering which men bring upon themselves by unskilful action. These precepts of mine are a

medicine for your sickness. Take them and become safe from sorrow. All fear the rod; all fear death. Putting oneself in the place of another, one should neither strike nor kill." And the people, reverently receiving the precepts from the lips of the Master, assenting to the undeniable truth of his words, bowed themselves in homage: kings, ministers, treasurers, artisans, householders, hetaerae and beggars. Many were the ascetics of other faiths who embraced the Doctrine of the Buddha with the simple formula: "I go for refuge to the Buddha. I go for refuge to the Dhamma. I go for refuge to the Sangha." The Teacher, the Teaching and the Taught were their refuge but they themselves had to effect their own liberation. "You yourself have to tread the Path; the Buddhas can but show the way"—it was the supreme test of self-reliance, the greatest assertion of human freedom, so that in accepting the discipline they were proving the triumph of men's free will in its highest and ultimate sense, taking upon themselves the mastery of their own destiny.

VII

“Profound and difficult to understand is this Ariyan Doctrine, O Bhikkhus, only to be understood by the wise; deep and unfathomable as the ocean. But like the vast ocean, it has but one flavour throughout—the flavour of liberation.” So it was that some failed to follow the Teaching, while others, like the great disciple Sāriputta, perceived its truth on hearing just one verse from the lips of a monk who was himself not completely a master of it. Others there were who started well, but fell by the wayside like the unfortunate Devadatta, intoxicated by his mastery of the psychic powers, who became maddened by pride and ambition and so cast himself down into hell. But with unchanged serenity the Master smiled, knowing that Devadatta too, in course of time, would expiate his evil deeds and attain enlightenment. To a Buddha, the enormous cycles of time are but as a moment: with his divine eye he surveyed the world, the seen and unseen, to the furthest limits of space, and knew the nature of gods and men—what past deeds had produced them and where their destinies lay. For the potentialities of a man’s nature are deep hidden in his past; he is the heir of a countless succession of dead selves and only a Supreme Buddha can know when the moment of fruition, the ripening of wisdom, is about to take place.

There was, for instance, the ruthless murderer

Aṅgulimāla, who wore about his neck a grisly garland of the fingers of his victims. Surveying the world with his divine eye of infinite compassion, the Buddha one morning saw this outlaw and he perceived that an atrocious crime was about to take place. To complete his garland the murderer needed one more finger; and Aṅgulimāla's mother was on her way to visit her son.

Instantaneously, as a strong man reaches out his arm, the Buddha was upon the scene, for to one who has conquered life and death, space no longer exists. He stood before Aṅgulimāla, radiant and majestic, and barred his way. But one thought alone possessed the murderer's mind—he must obtain the finger. He drew his knife and leaped towards the Buddha.

He leaped, but the same distance remained between them. Calmly the Buddha surveyed him, compassion in his eyes. Aṅgulimāla started running towards him, but although the Buddha remained motionless, the distance between them was not decreased. Aṅgulimāla ran, and as he ran he cried out, "Stop, Ascetic! Stand still!"

"I am still, Aṅgulimāla," the calm voice replied. "It is you who is running."

Panting and frenzied, the murderer strove to reach his objective, but no matter how fast he ran, the figure of the Buddha remained motionless before him, still,

remote, imperturbable.

And the voice was speaking again, penetrating into the depths of his consciousness. "I am still, Aṅgulimāla. For he who is still, goes; but he who goes is still."

Exhausted and confused then, the murderer came to a halt. And as ever, the Buddha stood before him. Waves of tremendous force struck against the murderer, enveloped him and rendered him powerless. But they were waves of compassion, vibrations of an infinite, indescribable power and beatitude that flowed over and through him, and he was aware of a super cosmic light that seemed at first terrible but when, giving way to his weakness, he surrendered himself to the light, it was more tender and comforting than anything he had ever known. He fell on his knees and stretched out his arms towards that glorious light, towards that all-embracing compassion. And the heat and frenzy of his heart was calmed.

"I am still, Aṅgulimāla. For he who is still, goes; but he who goes is still."

In that moment Aṅgulimāla understood. "I take refuge in the Buddha: in the Dhamma: in the Sangha." And so the former murderer, whose pride had been the garland of fingers hung about his neck, took the

yellow robe of a bhikkhu and in no long time attained arahatship.

Many are the ways whereby a man may be brought to realise the truth. The Supreme Buddha was master of them all. If the potentiality for understanding were present, the Buddha could awaken it, bring it to perfection. Where a demonstration of power was called for, he exercised power. Where wisdom was called for, he exercised verbal skill, yet always with gentleness, forbearance and compassion. There was a philosopher skilled in dialectics who swore to overcome the Buddha in argument. Although the Buddha did not value dialectics, rarely resorting to argument, before long the sophist was reduced to confusion. He contradicted himself, became entangled in his own theories, and became alarmed for his reputation. Sweat poured from his body and his mind became dazed; and in the end he crept away, leaving the Buddha serene and calm as ever. For who can refute truth?

But those, often people of simpler minds, who listened to the Teaching and allowed it to sink into deeper consciousness, or who tested it by the touchstone of their own experience, knew the awakening of confidence and pursued the Path to the glorious goal. For wisdom does not always consist in learning or scholarship; it is something that may, and

often does, exist independently of these.

VIII

“All compounded things are impermanent.”

For forty-five years, the exalted Buddha taught the incomparable Doctrine until his *sāsana* became established. Then, in his eightieth year, the time came for him to give up his existence. To the arahat who has seen Nibbāna in this very life, death is of no account. He suffers the continuation of his earthly existence only for the good of others, knowing all the time the process of arising and passing away, the continual agitation of the elements which men call “life” to be but a flux of energies, without stability and without permanence. And so a day came when, at the small town of Kusināra, the Supreme Buddha laid himself down for the last time. None can escape the pains of existence, and the Buddha’s body was old and enfeebled by sickness. But not so his mind. Alert, composed and tranquil, he continued to survey the world. He was about to leave. His robe had been spread for him by his devoted attendant, Ānanda, between twin sal trees. And the bare branches of the

sal trees blossomed over his head and broke into glorious bloom in the season of bareness.

A wandering ascetic of another faith, hearing of the Buddha's greatness, came and begged to talk with him. "The Blessed One is sick," he was told, "Please do not disturb the Blessed One. He is resting."

But the Buddha called out, "Who is there?" And when they told him, he said, "Let the wandering ascetic approach. Do not forbid him."

So the wandering ascetic approached, and saluting the Blessed One, he seated himself respectfully on one side. And the Blessed One discoursed to him for a long time. At the end of the discourse the wandering ascetic acknowledged the Teacher and begged admission to the Order. He was the Buddha's last convert.

Rapidly the news spread that the Supreme Buddha was about to pass away, and from far and wide came the sorrowing people to pay their last homage to the beloved Teacher. From the adjoining kingdoms came the brahmins and nobles of the warrior caste together with the people, and assembled about the Buddha's last resting place. From the heavenly realms also, the devas and Brahmas gathered together and heavenly music was heard from invisible minstrels. At the same time, divine perfumes filled the air and petals from

flowers of more than earthly beauty were scattered on the Buddha's couch. And seeing this, the Blessed One spoke to Ānanda and those about him, and what he said was this: "It is right and lifting that the passing of a Tathāgata should be honoured by divine music, divine perfumes and flowers of celestial beauty. But not thus is the Tathāgata most truly honoured. The layman or woman who fulfils all the greater and lesser duties, who observes the Precepts and follows the Noble Eightfold path, he or she it is who renders the greatest reverence and truest homage to the Teacher."

And when the sorrowing Ānanda, who had not yet attained arahatship, gave way to his grief, the Buddha reminded him of the Doctrine. "Have I not told you Ānanda, that all compounded things must pass away? Then grieve not, but apply yourself with determination. The Teacher must pass away, but the Teaching remains. I leave you the Doctrine; when I am gone, let that be your guide and refuge."

Calm, tranquil and in full possession of his great faculties, the Buddha continued to advise and instruct and encourage his followers to the last. Just before the end, he gave his final exhortation: "Let the Dhamma be to you a lamp and a refuge. Seek no external refuge. Strive with earnestness."

Then, with faculties collected and intent, he entered

into the first jhāna. And rising out of the first stage he passed into the second. And rising out of the second stage he passed into the third. And rising out of the third stage he passed into the fourth. And rising out of the fourth stage of deep meditation, he entered into the sphere of the infinity of space. And passing out of the consciousness of the infinity of space, he entered into the sphere of the infinity of consciousness. And passing out of the sphere of the infinity of consciousness, he entered the sphere of nothingness. And leaving behind the stage of nothingness, he entered into the realm of neither-perception nor non-perception. And leaving the realm of neither-perception nor non-perception, he entered into the attainment of the cessation of perception and feeling. Then the Venerable Ānanda said to the Venerable Anuruddha; “O Venerable Sir, O Anuruddha, the Blessed One is dead.”

“Not so Brother Ānanda,” replied the Venerable Thera. “The Blessed One is not dead. He has entered into the attainment of the cessation of perception and feeling.” Then the Blessed One, passing out of the attainment of the cessation of perception and feeling, entered into the sphere of neither-perception nor non-perception. And passing out of the sphere of neither-perception nor non-perception, he entered into the sphere of nothingness. And passing out of the realm of

nothingness, he entered into the sphere of the infinity of consciousness. And passing out of the sphere of the infinity of consciousness, he entered into the sphere of the infinity of space. And leaving the sphere of the infinity of space he entered into the fourth jhāna; and leaving the fourth stage he entered into the third; and leaving the third stage he entered into the second; and passing out of the second he entered into the first jhāna. Then, passing out of the first jhāna, he entered into the second. And passing out of the second jhāna, he entered into the third. And leaving the third jhāna, he entered into the fourth stage of deep meditation. And passing out of the last stage of deep meditation, he immediately expired. And when the Blessed One expired there arose, at the moment of his passing out of existence, a mighty earthquake, terrible and awe-inspiring and the thunders of heaven burst forth. When the Blessed One expired, Brahma Sahampati, at the moment of his passing away from existence uttered this stanza:

“All beings that have life must lay aside
Their complex form, the mind and body
compound
From which, in heaven or earth, they draw
their brief
And fleeting individuality—
Even as the Teacher, such a one as he,

Unequaled among all the sons of men.
Successor to the Buddhas of the past.
In wisdom mighty and in insight clear—
Even as he hath passed beyond our ken.”

And when the Blessed One expired, Sakka, king of the gods, at the moment of his passing away, uttered this stanza:

“Transient are all beings, their parts, their powers:
Growth is their nature, and with growth decay.
Produced are they, and then dissolved again.
And best it is when they have sunk to rest.”

When the Blessed One expired, the Venerable Anuruddha, at the moment of his passing away, uttered these stanzas:

“When he who from all craving was released,
Who to Nibbāna’s tranquil state attained,
When the great Sage his life’s span had fulfilled,
No breathless struggle shook that steadfast heart.
All resolute, with firm, unshaken mind,
He calmly triumphed o’er the pangs of death;
Even as a bright flame dies away, so he gained
His deliverance from the bonds of life.”

When the Blessed One expired, the Venerable Ānanda,

at the moment of his passing out of existence, uttered this stanza:

“Then was a mighty fear!
The hair uprose,
When he, possessed of all perfection,
He, The Supreme Enlightened One, expired.”

Thus, having taught the sublime doctrine of deliverance, the beloved Teacher passed out of *samsāric* conditions forever. He left behind him, bound up with his Teaching, the memory in men’s minds of a personality absolutely unique in human experience. The virtues towards which others had striven, in him were exemplified in their fullest perfection, effortlessly with unwavering assurance. Freed for ever from internal conflicts that mark our human condition, the alternations between selfishness and altruism, the loves and hates, doubts and fears that beset even the best of men. He trod a path trackless as the flight of birds in space, and only one who was his equal could fully understand him. Men judge and evaluate one another by their own standards, the standards set by self and the degree to which self-interest motivates them. The Exalted Buddha had destroyed this illusion of self, had become identified only with the Dhamma, for he had said: “One who beholds the Teacher beholds the Doctrine: and in beholding the Doctrine

he beholds the Teacher." All limitations of phenomenal personality transcended, the Buddha had no peer save in the Buddhas of former ages, and will have none until the next Buddha Maitreya, walks the earth.

IX

Two thousand five hundred years have passed away since that day when the Supreme Buddha entered into final Nibbāna. The Doctrine was then only preserved by word of mouth, memorised and passed on from teacher to pupils. But while the arahats who had heard it from the lips of the Master were yet alive, a great meeting was convened to recite the Teaching. Each point was then carefully checked and confirmed and the body of the Doctrine was consolidated. During the reign of Asoka, another meeting was held for the same purpose, and by that time it had become necessary to correct certain heretical versions that had become current. After that, it was put into writing, and the present Pali Tipiṭaka of three divisions, the Sutta, the Vinaya and the Abhidhamma, represents this authentic Theravāda tradition. Generations have come

and gone, but the *sāsana* of the Buddha still stands. And although the greater part of the world yet remains in the dark night of ignorance, there has been a strong historic current from Buddhism that has affected the whole of human thought, lifting and ennobling it. Our present age is a paradox. While it is highly materialistic in the sense that all the emphasis has come to be laid on material achievements and activities centred about the world, it shows at the same time a growing tendency towards higher aspiration. Men on the whole are more humane, their laws more just, their relationships more equitable, than in the past. There are many dark blots upon our civilisation, survivals from a barbaric past, but they stand out the more clearly because of the progress we have made elsewhere. We are more aware of the shadows in contrast to the light and cruelties and injustices that only a few generations ago were accepted as part of the natural order of things, now stand out with shocking clarity.

Together with this, there is a widening of mental and spiritual horizons. More and more people are turning, often unconsciously, towards a Buddhist interpretation of life. Warped and distorted this may have become in its progress from East to West, yet the spirit is there revealing itself in modifications of traditional thought, in a broader and more tolerant

view of the conflict which is life.

Many are the creeds that men have followed, many the idols before which they have abased themselves, many the dogmas to which they have prostituted their understanding. And inasmuch as in every thinking man there lurks a vestige of knowledge gathered painfully from his past lives, which speaks to him of moral law and a beauty to be realised, these creeds have moulded themselves to this faith imperfectly; perhaps, because they could not reach the ultimate understanding of life which alone can give actuality to man's dreams of perfection, but still containing in themselves something of this knowledge, the knowledge that as ye sow, so shall ye reap—and so have helped to raise this human nature which is midway between the animal and the divine. But above and beyond them all stands the supreme Truth, the Truth discovered and taught by him who was Prince Siddhattha of the Sakyan clan. Who became the Supremely Enlightened One, Teacher of gods and men, and around whose funeral pyre, because he was a Khattiya and the greatest warrior of all—the conqueror of self, who shed no drop of blood—the warrior nobles raised a palisade of spears.

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